



[Mountainside](#) by [Luddleston](#)

Category: Hades (Video Game 2018)

Genre: Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Childhood Friends, First Kiss, First Time, Friends to Lovers, Frottage, Getting Together, Hand Jobs, Illustrations, Intercrural Sex, M/M, Other Iliad Characters, Sparring, Zag raised by Persephone AU

Language: English

Characters: Achilles (Hades Video Game), Patroclus (Hades Video Game), Persephone (Hades Video Game), Zagreus (Hades Video Game)

Relationships: Achilles/Patroclus/Zagreus (Hades Video Game)

Status: Completed

Published: 2022-01-15

Updated: 2022-01-15

Packaged: 2022-12-19 10:48:10

Rating: Explicit

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 17,716

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

"Fate brought us together on this mountain, once and then once again. And whether on this mountain or no, fate will bring us together again."

An alternate universe in which Persephone raises Zagreus on the surface, and makes her cottage home on Mt. Pelion. After several summers of Zagreus training with the centaur Chiron, he meets two boys with whom he has an undeniable connection. Over the years, he watches the three of them grow together, fall in love with each other, and wonders if that love could ever extend to him.

Mountainside

Author's Note:

- For [yosgay](#).

For [@magatsula](#) on Twitter as a part of the THIGHexchange! I went a little crazy with your prompt, you mentioned Zag during Trojan War Era Patrochilles and I went a little further back in the timeline than that! Hope you enjoy this as much as I enjoyed working on it!!

In the summer of Zagreus' fourth year, someone he did not recognize came to his mother's house on the mountainside, requesting shelter and aid from the inhabitants of the humble cottage.

They seemed like a strange pair, although Zagreus couldn't be sure, because most of his mother's visitors were nymphs, or the centaur Chiron who lived on the other side of the mountain. Perhaps these were ordinary people and the nymphs were the strange ones. Zagreus watched the travelers from the lofted area over the main floor of the cottage, where his bed was. He had seen them coming and hid, under his mother's instructions, but he was curious about the enormous white horse he had spotted through the window.

They were both men, adults, like his mother. The one who did most of the talking was only a bit taller than Persephone, with long, dark hair and clothes dyed in rich colors and hemmed with detailed embroidery. He wore gold on his ears and a circlet on his brow, and looked how Zagreus imagined a king ought to. The other man hung back, stepping clumsily. His hair was red-orange like fire, and he had a cloth tied around his head which covered his eyes. He was dressed more simply, although he also held himself in a regal manner.

From his angle, Zagreus could not see his mother's face, but he did hear her gasp when their quiet conversation was broken by a howling wail unlike anything Zagreus had ever heard and he realized there were not two travelers, there were *three*.

What he had thought was a cloth-wrapped parcel held to the first man's chest was actually an infant, who was squirming and wriggling and crying. Persephone gave a soft word of commiseration and asked if she could take the baby, stepping forward into Zagreus' frame of sight and plucking him from the tired father's arms, bouncing the child around until he hushed.

Then, she turned her head toward the ladder to the loft and looked at her own boy, crouched in hiding and peering through the slats in the floor to observe the newcomers.

"Zagreus," she said, "it is safe. You can come down."

When he scrambled down the ladder, he heard a sharp intake of breath from the dark-haired man, and he had to duck not to be hit in the head by the sightless hands of his companion, reaching for the source of the new sound.

"Hello, sirs," he said, addressing them in the same way he did Chiron. He looked to his mother to determine whether he was correct and she gave him an approving nod for remembering his manners.

"This is my son," she said. "Come, sit, and we will eat, and get your child taken care of."

The small table in the cottage kitchen seemed crowded with two men at it, and so Zagreus sat on a cushion on the floor, and Persephone crouched beside him to ask if he could be counted on to watch the child while she attended to their dinner, showing him how to hold the baby so that he was safe and would not squirm away.

Zagreus crossed his legs and Persephone sat the baby in the cradle of his lap, a warm, slightly squirmy weight.

"His feet—" said the baby's father.

"He will not harm your son," said Persephone.

Zagreus immediately noticed that the baby was nymph-born from his ears, small and pointed at the tips. The baby's eyes, once opened, fixed on

Zagreus' face, or more accurately, on his laurel, watching the red-orange leaves float down. He reached out a chubby little hand to try to catch them, but missed. This didn't seem to matter—he happily wiggled in his blankets, kicking his feet and smiling wide enough to show that he only had two teeth, right in the middle.

While Persephone finished her cooking, putting on an extra pot with some vegetables boiling until they were mushy enough for a mostly-toothless baby to eat, she talked to their guests, pouring them both some of the wine grandmother Demeter had brought with her on last year's annual visit. The dark-haired man pressed the cup into his companion's hand, so that he did not have to go searching for it.

"Who are you?" Zagreus asked them, prompting Persephone to shake her head.

"Zagreus, remember your manners. You cannot go interrogating our guests before they've had a chance to eat and relax a bit."

"It is fine," said the dark-haired man, sitting turned to face Zagreus (probably to keep an eye on his baby) with his back leaning against the edge of the table. "My name is Peleus. I am the king of Phthia, it is a kingdom near the base of this mountain, at the coast. This is my companion, Phoenix. I am traveling to see my grandfather, Chiron, and bringing Phoenix in the case that the centaur can heal the curse of blindness his father placed upon him."

Phoenix gave a grim nod. "Forgive me for not showing my face, my lady, young man. This curse has ruined my sight but makes me very sensitive to the light, and removing this blindfold is impossible except in the dark."

"Quite all right," Mother said. "I am sorry to hear of your situation, and I do hope that Chiron can help. He is an accomplished healer."

"What is his name?" Zagreus asked, indicating the baby on his lap, who was currently chewing on the blanket that he was wrapped in. It was very cute, and made his round cheeks look even more adorable.

"This is my son," said Peleus, especially fond and warm. "He does not yet have a name, this is another reason I am visiting Chiron, so that he can bestow upon my boy his name."

The baby did not look very much like Peleus, blond where his father was dark, blue-green eyes where his father's were a bright, warm gold. Perhaps the baby resembled his mother. Zagreus had one eye that matched his mother's coloring. "I'm Zagreus," Zagreus said, introducing himself foremost to the baby, who Zagreus had decided was the most important member of this traveling party. The baby made a little burbling coo of a noise, his bright eyes shining up at Zagreus.

"Zagreus." Peleus looked like he was turning over the name in his mind. "I was not aware you lived on this mountain. You, or your mother."

"We have only been here since shortly before Zagreus was born." Mother removed the pot from the stove, and gave Zagreus a little bowl and the smallest spoon they had, which was from when Zagreus himself had been an infant. She sat the baby up in his arms, with his back to Zagreus' front, and showed Zagreus how to feed him.

It was only when she had placed food before both of the men that she gave them her name, and Phoenix dropped his spoon onto his plate.

"*Goddess*, I did not realize—" Peleus said, and Mother held up her hand.

"There is no need," she said, giving them a kind smile. "All I want is to ease your journey a bit."

"Thank you, my lady," he said, with all possible graciousness.

"We are honored to be in your care," Phoenix said, with a bow of his head, although he was not facing quite in the right direction to address Persephone.

The baby said, "*ahm!*" which Zagreus took as a cue to give him more to eat.

That night, Persephone shared Zagreus' bed in the loft so that the travelers would not have to worry about climbing up the ladder with a baby in tow. Late in the depths of the evening, when the hearth was banked and the only sounds floating through the open window were the calls of frogs and owls, Zagreus woke to hear soft singing from downstairs, a father trying to lull his child to sleep in the same way Persephone used to sing to Zagreus.

Zagreus shifted closer to his mother and said a quiet prayer that the travelers would be safe on their journey.

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After a week, King Peleus, his companion, and his son stopped by on their return journey, and presented Persephone with an enormous basket of fruits and greens foraged from hard-to-reach areas of the forest by the nymphs. These had been sent with greetings from Endeïs herself, the oread who protected the mountain, who was also Peleus' mother.

This time, Phoenix was carrying the baby, who had a piece of the man's bright red hair in his mouth and was happily wiggling his little pointed ears. Phoenix's sight was returned, and he was no longer blindfolded, letting Zagreus see a pair of bright, if tired eyes. His attention was mostly fixed on Zagreus.

"You weren't kidding about his feet being on fire," he said quietly to Peleus, who gave a laugh loud enough to show that his mother's nymph heritage had not passed him by. He had very sharp teeth.

"I don't burn the grass anymore," Zagreus said, looking down at his toes. Well. Sometimes he did, but he was on his best behavior in front of guests and would not burn the grass today.

Phoenix shifted his grip on the baby, setting him on one hip so that he could open a pouch at his belt with his other hand. "I have something for you, as well, young Lord Zagreus," he said, and the prospect of a gift, which may be something much more exciting than food, had Zagreus bouncing in place, making Persephone hold his hand a bit tighter to keep him in place.

He presented Zagreus with a wood carving of a fish, like the kind you could catch in the rivers that flowed down the mountains. It fit perfectly in Zagreus' palm, and had been carved so that a knot in the wood made the fish's eye.

"Mum, look!"

"I see," Persephone said. "And what ought you to say, for such a gift?"

"Thank you!" he peeped obediently, clutching the toy to his chest and then looking at the baby on Phoenix's hip, who had spat out the hair he'd been chewing on and had shoved most of one pudgy fist into his mouth instead.

"Does he have a name now, sir?" Zagreus asked.

The boy's father was the one who answered. "His name is Achilles."

"Achilles." Zagreus tried it out. Achilles did not seem to be aware he had been given a name yet, and did not respond to it, but it sounded very nice.

Zagreus felt an urge to give this mortal boy something of his own. He was the first child Zagreus had ever met, and Zagreus wanted to give Achilles something to bless him, to protect him.

He let go of his mother's hand and scrubbed his fingers through his laurels, searching for a leaf that felt loose. One of the ones near the end dislodged easily, coming off in between his fingers like a little flake of gold. He held it out, heart pounding, suddenly shy.

"For me?" Phoenix asked.

Zagreus shook his head, words no longer coming easily to him, and held it toward Achilles.

"For him?"

Zagreus nodded.

Achilles reached out, but instead of taking the leaf from Zagreus, he wrapped tiny fingers around Zag's.

Zagreus did not let go until Peleus, who seemed to notice what was happening, came by and gently pried Achilles' fingers from him. "May I accept this on his behalf?" Peleus asked, and Zagreus nodded, handing him the leaf.

Achilles smiled a soft little baby smile at him.

"Thank you for your gift, young Lord Zagreus, and thank you for your hospitality, Lady Persephone. I can only hope that one day, my son is lucky enough to meet the two of you again."

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It was a long time before Zagreus met another child, and even longer before he met Achilles again. When he was twelve years of age, he made the journey to the opposite side of the mountain, where Chiron lived, to be trained by the centaur. It was here that he found that although his blood was red, he was not wholly mortal, and he had the ability to shape his own blood and crystallize it into gemstones that he could aim and fire like projectiles even without the use of a sling or a bow. He also became quite proficient in a number of weapons, but especially with a sword.

It was agreed that in the autumn, when the time came for the harvest, Zagreus would go home to his mother, and so he was not able to return until spring melted the snow and the journey was not so treacherous.

Chiron had other students—when Zagreus arrived, it was a boy called Ajax, who was the size of a man even though he said he was only three years Zagreus' senior. He was a great-grandson of Chiron and a grandson of Endeis, the nymph who Zagreus only saw very rarely flitting through the woods. Ajax was a cousin of Achilles, and when he returned home to his father after training alongside Zagreus for a short while, he promised to tell Achilles hello.

Shortly after Ajax left, a boy called Aeneas came up the mountain. He was very different from Ajax, who, despite being practically the size of the mountain itself, was very much mortal, little of Endeis' nymph blood showing in him. Aeneas was a son of Aphrodite, and thereby a distant relative to Zagreus, and although it did not show in superlative strength any more than Ajax possessed, there was something preternaturally graceful about him.

Aeneas was particularly talented with a bow, as expected of a half-brother of Eros, although he also fought with all the same weapons Zagreus learned and sparred with him as well. He was of an age with Zagreus but he was rarely able to beat Zagreus in a fight, even if he out-shot him at every chance. He did not train with Chiron long, and returned home after only two years.

After Aeneas left, there was a year in which Zagreus was Chiron's only student. He was becoming skilled quickly, and with nobody new to spar with, it was clear he was becoming bored. Endeis came around more often to give him a sparring partner, but he was sort of afraid of her, and never managed to win a fight against her. She did not promote the sort of easy banter and conversation Zagreus had with Ajax or Aeneas.

Zagreus was thrilled completely when Chiron told him that when he next came in the spring, there would be another student joining him, a young prince.

He did not expect there to be two boys.

Chiron said he had trained a pair of brothers a few years before Zagreus, Kastor and Pollux, two of the four children of Leda. These two, while very close in age, did not appear to be brothers. However, it was hard to tell, because when Zagreus arrived, running through a chilly spring rain, they were entangled in a wrestling match. This made it difficult to discern their facial features, but he could tell that one of them was dark-skinned and dark-haired, and the other had a mess of blond curls and his skin was a warm bronze.

"Zagreus." Chiron stepped out of the cavern where he made his home, shooting a sidelong glance at the boys, still squabbling. "You get taller every time I see you."

"Not by much, sir." He had still yet to outgrow his mother.

"Would you mind breaking that up?" Chiron asked, one of his ears flicking in irritation.

"Of course, yeah." It was clearly a play-fight; the boys were laughing as much as they were shouting, poking at each other and tussling rather than actually trying to throw punches. It was easy enough to sling an arm around the lighter one's waist and tug him off his companion, who he'd had pinned.

"Hey, let me go!" he squeaked, in a voice that had yet to break. Zagreus obligingly set him on his feet, and then held out a hand to lift the other boy off the ground. The gesture was not accepted—the boy was staring, as it turned out most mortals did, at Zagreus' feet.

"Boys," Chiron said, in what Zagreus thought of as his 'instructor voice'. "This is Zagreus. He is the son of the goddess Persephone, and another of my students."

Zagreus gave them a little wave in greeting, which was returned by the blond one.

"Zagreus, this is Achilles Pelides, prince of Phthia, and his companion, Patroclus of Opus."

Achilles.

This was the same Achilles, golden hair and soft, blue eyes. Under that tumble of blond curls there were pointed nymph's ears. He grinned wide enough to show sharp teeth.

"I've met you once before," Zagreus told Achilles, then added, "you were a baby, you wouldn't remember."

"Oh!" Achilles rocked up onto his toes, bouncing in place. "My father told me! Your—" he tapped at his head, indicating the place where Zagreus' laurels sat. "Wait a second!"

He ran into the cave, and the other boy, Patroclus, stared after him, bewildered. Moments later, Achilles' footsteps approached again and he ran into view, shouting once again and holding up a fist.

"This! You gave me this one!"

What he was clutching was a necklace, with a hanging golden pendant, which Zagreus did not recognize for a moment.

"It's my leaf," he realized, the perfect little gold shape strung onto a chain which Achilles looped over his head and tugged down. When he wore it, it hung to the center of his chest.

"Yeah! My father said a god with burning feet gave it to me when I was a baby."

"I'm not—my mother is a goddess, I don't know what I am," Zagreus said.

Chiron set a weathered hand on Zagreus' head, scruffing his fingers through his unruly shock of black hair. "You are one of my best students," he said, as if that was answer enough. "Might you show these lads around? They have been here for a few days, but they are still learning the trails."

"Of course," he said, and gestured for the boys to follow. They did, Achilles springing after him and Patroclus going at a more meandering, hesitant pace.

He showed them the more obvious paths through the forest, and the trail down to the river, indicating the path that would lead to the village in the foothills and the one that curved around the side of the mountain and led, after a long journey, to Persephone's home. He also remarked on where it was best to go hunting for various types of game animals, although Zagreus preferred to fish, himself.

He noticed quickly that Achilles talked at a constant pace, which was going to be an issue if he continued to do so while they took him hunting.

"How do your feet not catch the leaves on fire?" He sent a small flock of birds scattering with just the high-pitched squeal of his voice.

"If you kicked me, would you catch me on fire? Like this?" He demonstrated by kicking a tree and angered a resident squirrel.

"It's okay if you do, my mother dipped me in the Styx and so now I'm invulnerable. I put my hand in the fire all the time just 'cause." He tried to reach up and touch Zagreus' laurels, but even though he was the taller of the two, it was easy for Zagreus to duck out of the way.

Zagreus tried to answer his questions with patience, but he was also casting glances over his shoulder at Patroclus to ensure he hadn't fallen behind. Patroclus kept pace, not quite with the exuberance of Achilles, but he had stamina, and he was *silent* when he moved. Of the two of them, Zagreus bet Patroclus would be the more dangerous one in an ambush, and Achilles would be the more dangerous in a spar.

They would be an impressive combination, once they learned to stop fooling around, Zagreus thought, and then wondered when his thoughts started sounding so much like Chiron. Perhaps, with these two new boys, it would be less a case of Zagreus learning alongside them under Chiron, and Zagreus would instead have some useful knowledge of his own to share.

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In addition to being a chatterbox and downright wild at times, Achilles was constantly trying to impress Zagreus, which was a very strange new position for Zagreus to be in. He couldn't remember ever having behaved this way around Ajax, for example. Perhaps Chiron; Zagreus was always pleased to have praise from his tutor, but he had never been so blatant about asking for it.

He swore, he heard, "*Zagreus, look!*" twelve times a day.

Chiron was a bit more insightful when it came to determining why exactly Achilles was so interested in Zagreus' attention. "He is a prince who has been impressing everyone by his mere existence, much less his considerable skill, since he was born," Chiron told him. "You are the new factor, a person whom he has yet to charm, and he is not old enough to make his charm demure. Instead, he throws all of it at you at once."

Why Achilles wasn't doing this in Chiron's direction as often (though sometimes he did), Zagreus had no clue. Perhaps because Chiron was family. Perhaps because he thought Zagreus was a god.

Zagreus, though Persephone told him his father was some unnamed Chthonic god, was fairly certain divinity had skipped him. What god bled red, after all? This did not stop Achilles from adoring him, did not stop him from wanting to sit beside Zagreus at every evening meal, from helping him with his chores. Zagreus did appreciate the assistance, although at times he felt like he was ordering Achilles around a bit.

He also worried about Patroclus. The two were clearly inseparable. Achilles proudly told him that even though his mother (who Zagreus had learned was the nereid Thetis) said Patroclus ought not to come along with Achilles to Mt. Pelion, he had followed anyhow. They had been together half of Achilles' young life already, and they would be together forever, in Achilles' own words.

Whatever puppylike affection Achilles seemed to bear for Zagreus, Patroclus did not possess the same.

It was after they had been together a few weeks—more than a month but less than two—that Patroclus stormed off in the middle of a sparring match with Zagreus. They had gone several rounds already, as both boys were improving in strength and stamina daily, but Patroclus had lost every one. Eventually, he jabbed the end of his practice spear into the soft earth, told Chiron with a polite bow of his head that he was going to have to take his leave, and turned and walked off.

In Patroclus' quieter expression of emotion, this was as good as shouting, "*I quit!*" and running away in a huff.

Zagreus gave Chiron a helpless look.

"Go after him," Chiron said. Achilles was down fetching some supplies in the village, so he was not able to soothe whatever hurt Patroclus felt. "I promise, Zagreus, you can help more than I can."

Not at all sure how that would be true, Zagreus went.

He found Patroclus sitting by the creek, his feet in the water, breathing still heavy from their match. He turned around when he heard Zagreus approach, then made a frustrated noise like *urgh!* and angrily pushed his hair out of his face only for it to flop right back when he leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

"Are you okay?" Zagreus asked him.

"I'm not meant to be here," Patroclus said, flatly, as if it were fact. "I'm not meant to be by his side. Someone like you would be better, indeed." The 'him' was most certainly Achilles.

Zagreus sat beside Patroclus, crossing his legs instead of bothering the fish by putting his feet in the water. "What makes you say that?"

"I never beat you. I never come close."

"Do you think Achilles ever beats me?"

Patroclus looked dead ahead at the water. "I haven't seen it, true. But I think he could. He holds his own."

"You would know if he had," said Zagreus, who knew he was moving in the right direction by the way Patroclus couldn't help a laugh. Achilles said whatever was on his mind all the time, and it was an easy thing to joke about. "You know, when I started training with Chiron, there was a boy here who was older than me by the same span as I am older than you. And I was Achilles' age."

Patroclus was a year older than Achilles, thirteen. He nodded along with Zagreus but didn't say anything.

Zagreus continued. "He had already been training with Chiron for five years. He started when he was *ten*. He beat me in every sparring match. He was twice my size. Let me tell you, Patroclus, you have already lasted longer against me than I ever did against Ajax."

Patroclus' hands clasped and unclasped in his lap, as if he didn't quite want to be convinced into agreeing with Zagreus.

"I am older than you, and have more training. Beating me would be almost impossible for you, just like it is for Achilles. Achilles lasts longer because he is fast, but you impress me because you are almost silent when you fight. In a fair fight, in a ring with the two of us facing one another, you are at a disadvantage, but if you were to ambush me in the dark or from behind, you would catch me unaware."

Patroclus looked at him then, with wide eyes, almost teary, as if even that small praise was overwhelming to him. He got that way when Chiron praised him too, gazing down at his feet, shy and awkward and hesitant to accept accolades. But he would gain confidence, the more they acknowledged him.

"He still likes you more than me," he said stubbornly, finally giving Zagreus the real problem. Of course, a boy of Patroclus' age could not help but be jealous of the way his best friend trailed after another boy like a duckling after its mother.

"No, he doesn't," Zagreus said, because Achilles may have held affection for him but it was not as steadfast as what he felt for Patroclus, his constant companion. "He will prove that once I leave for the winter, he'll forget all about me until I come next spring."

Patroclus nodded, considering. Achilles was a boy very prone to passing fancies. He had even forgotten to write his father any letters until very recently, and only because Chiron had reminded him that Peleus would worry. "Well, I won't let him forget you entirely," he said, and this felt like a peace offering of sorts.

"Only mostly," Zagreus joked.

"Sure. I'll allow 'mostly'."

Zagreus did stick his feet in the water now, to splash Patroclus, and for the first time, he actually managed to make the boy laugh.

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It did not occur to Zagreus that his compliments had become blanket permission for Patroclus to leap at him out of trees and bushes and every dark corner in almost daily ambushes.

Zagreus' heart nearly stopped the first few times it happened, but eventually he learned to anticipate a scrawny boy dive-bombing him at every moment, completely silent until he landed and then shrieking with laughter when Zagreus screamed. (Zagreus usually screamed.)

This in turn made Achilles cackle wildly, usually announcing, "*death from above!*" even if Patroclus did not land on him from above. Sometimes Patroclus took Zagreus out at the knees, tackling him into the dirt, no longer so worried about his flaming feet.

Achilles found great joy in this, claiming that Phoenix never 'let them do death from above', and Patroclus seemed particularly happy whenever he managed to make Achilles smile. He had his companion's attention back, and balance was restored. Zagreus was pleased about this development, too, even if it came at his expense.

Really, he couldn't have jumped Chiron once in a while?



By the time Zagreus had learned to anticipate Patroclus' attacks and snatch him out of the air (which Patroclus also thought was wonderful and hilarious), the summer nights were getting cooler and the winds were

changing to autumn. It stormed for three days straight and the lot of them were holed up in Chiron's abode, listening while he told them stories about the world they lived in, the gods that shaped it, and the heroes it bore.

Achilles often asked how those gods and heroes were related to Zagreus, knowing he was the grandson of an Olympian, which surprised Zagreus, who had never really thought to wonder about his own connections to the divine, viewing the gods as something very separate from his ordinary self and his mostly-ordinary mother.

After the storm broke, Zagreus too broke the news that he was due to return to Persephone.

Achilles, who had forgotten completely that this was a part of Zagreus' yearly routine, went wide-eyed and teary.

"I'm coming back!" he reassured them, when they noticed he was packing up his things. "Just as soon as the snow melts, I'll be back."

"Melt the snow yourself with your feet," Achilles said, petulant in a way that Zagreus understood was not anger toward Zagreus, but frustration with himself for being so easily upset.

"Hey, I don't burn that hot."

Achilles, still hiding his face, made a wet laugh.

Before Zagreus turned to leave, Patroclus launched himself at him one more time, telegraphing his ambush for once, and letting Zagreus scoop him into an embrace, his arm around Patroclus' back, and the boy's face tucked into his shoulder. This was immediately added onto by Achilles, hugging them both and burying his face in Zagreus' opposite shoulder.

"If you don't come back, I'm going to wander around the mountain until I find you," Achilles promised. "I've been there before, instinct will lead me back, I'm sure of it."

"There's no need for that, I'll come back," Zagreus swore.

Patroclus said, "I hope the winter is short."

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When Zagreus returned for his second season of training with Achilles and Patroclus, there was much rejoicing, and not nearly as much awkward dramatics as there had been the first time around. The running joke this time was the fact that both their voices were breaking, but Achilles had it especially bad, hardly able to get a sentence out without an unfortunate squeak or crack. He loudly proclaimed he would never be able to sing again, and his voice cracked twice, and Zagreus couldn't quite hide the way he laughed.

They had both improved while Zagreus was gone, and even though he practiced while on his own, there was a lot to be said for having a tutor to correct his form and improve his skills. While neither of them could beat him one-on-one, they managed to take him down together on more than one occasion, which always led to a great deal of gloating.

There was not as much fanfare when he left that year, but they both held him just as tight, and Patroclus once again wished him a short winter.

Achilles once again told him to just melt the snow with his feet.

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By their third season together, Achilles had regained the ability to sing.

He played the lyre as well, something Zagreus had never had the discipline for, even though there was one in his mother's house. Patroclus was not inclined to musicality either, but both of them listened to Achilles, and once, Zagreus joined in, which made Achilles' words falter and his fingers drift off the strings.

"What?" Zagreus asked him.

"Nothing," Achilles said. "It's just... your voice."

Zagreus had never considered his singing voice. Persephone had taught him the kinds of songs children enjoyed, and also working songs, things to pass the time while he helped her bring in the harvest from her garden. "What about it?"

"It's lovely," Achilles told him. "I'm serious, you ought to sing more often."

Zagreus looked to Patroclus, who was considering him, rubbing over his chin, which had become somewhat of a habitual gesture for him ever since he started growing a beard this year. It didn't come in full enough that it was any more than a prickle of hair, and he shaved it as soon as it came in because it irritated him, but he still had adopted this gesture. "I agree with Achilles," he said, quite diplomatically. He looked the most regal of all of them, among a prince and a god, mostly because he was the only one who paid any attention to grooming and was not wild and unruly at all times. "Your voice is very nice, I would like to hear it more."

Zagreus flushed, and refused to sing any more that day.

If he joined in with Achilles from time to time after that, neither of them remarked on it, because as soon as they did, Zagreus would find himself shutting up out of pure embarrassment.

That autumn, he stayed so late his mother was furious at him when he came home. But before he left, he noticed something very peculiar in the midst of their typical goodbye embrace.

He pulled back to get a good look at Achilles.

"You're taller than me."

"No I'm not, I'm younger than you," said Achilles.

Zagreus drew himself to his full height and stood chest-to-chest with Achilles, holding up a hand to measure and finding himself somewhere around Achilles' forehead. "No, it's just that my hair sticks up and I have my laurels—you've managed to outgrow me already." Not to mention, Zagreus had hardly grown at all since he turned sixteen. Achilles, who had

hit a growth spurt recently, was already passing him up, and Patroclus would catch up soon.

"You are taller," Patroclus confirmed for him.

"Oh," Achilles said, bewildered at the fact that this was possible. "Well, I'll definitely not be taller than Chiron."

That was one immutable fact, to be sure.

"May your winter be short," Patroclus bade him.

"Melt the snow yourself," Achilles challenged, as always.

— — —

When Zagreus returned for the fourth time, Patroclus had caught up to Achilles in height and both of them very clearly surpassed Zagreus. This made their combat newly interesting, Zagreus having to learn to work with the new dynamic. They weren't much stronger pound for pound, both of them still gangly at sixteen and seventeen and Zagreus having put on more muscle as he rounded twenty, but they had a longer reach. Chiron was also training Patroclus to fight with two short swords, which presented a challenge neither Zagreus nor Achilles knew how to react to at first. Zagreus had figured it out sooner—Achilles, for once, had lost to Patroclus.

A few days later, for the very first time, Achilles beat Zagreus in a one-on-one spar.

He knocked Zagreus flat on his ass, too, his spearpoint at Zag's throat, a victorious grin on his face that Zagreus couldn't help but match, thrilled as he was to see his lads improve.

Patroclus, as he had one time long ago when Zagreus had beaten him in round after round, turned and ran away.

Achilles and Zagreus both started in his direction, and then Achilles stopped. "You go," he said. "He... while you were gone, I've been... things have been strange. You talk to him."

Zagreus wanted to ask, but he also didn't want Patroclus to get too far away.

It wasn't hard to find him. Patroclus was so panicked by whatever had stressed him that he didn't put effort into stealth. Zagreus saw his dark head peeking between a forked branch in a short, squat tree the rest of him was hidden behind.

"Patroclus?"

He caught a sudden gasp as Patroclus turned his head. "Kindly go away!" he called, peeking up behind the tree like a startled animal.

"Pat, if something bothered you, we can talk. You know you've no need to worry about Achilles or I outcompeting you," Zagreus said, taking one careful step closer.

"It is not that! Just! Leave me be! Thank you!"

"Are you quite sure?"

"Yes! I am *quite* sure, goodbye," he said, and then his head sank out of view, as if he had slumped to sit down.

Zagreus resolved to find him if he didn't arrive by dinner.

He did, and so there was no problem, overall, but he was still being cagey and odd, and Zagreus wondered if he had done something to upset him, or if Achilles had.

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When he was about nineteen, Zagreus started to spend many of his nights away from Chiron's home in the mountain cave, choosing to camp in the surrounding clearing instead. He had built a decent shelter, one wooden wall on the windy side and a thick canvas tent on all the others, a platform to keep it off the damp and cold of the ground and a cushy pile of pillows and blankets in the middle. This had become a necessity because the cave was quite crowded when occupied by three boys who were more on the side of men, as well as one full-grown centaur.

This was also necessary because Zagreus was a young man with a young man's appetites (maybe a little more than, given his Olympian blood) and unlike Achilles and Patroclus, who sometimes came back flushed and bright-eyed from the village in the foothills, Zagreus was not permitted off the mountain and could not find affection for himself in that particular manner.

Thankfully tonight he was not occupying himself in that way, because he heard a voice whisper his name from just outside the tent.

"Achilles?" he guessed, and was proven correct when a blond head poked in through the tent flap.

"Can I come in?"

"Yes, that's fine." Not that he wasn't already partway in anyhow.

Achilles situated himself next to Zagreus on his bed, looking around his tent, which was lit by the soft fire of Zagreus' laurels and his soles. "It's nice in here," he remarked. "I didn't think sleeping in a tent would be very comfortable. Can you light a fire in here, or would there be too much smoke? Do you even get cold?"

Zagreus, a chronic rambler himself, recognized it when he saw it. "Achilles," he said. "What did you come out here for?"

Achilles sighed, seeming to deflate, sinking against Zagreus' side. "It's Patroclus," he said, in a voice that made him seem quite small even though he spent each day outgrowing Zagreus in every dimension.

"Is everything alright?"

"Nooo," Achilles whined. "It started happening this winter, and I just... I can't *stand it*, Zagreus, he's driving me crazy."

"You're angry with him?" The two of them squabbled sometimes, but they never seemed to leave behind any lingering resentment.

Achilles shook his head. "Worse." He threw an arm around Zagreus, slumping miserably, woe oozing from him in a way that would have felt put-upon and dramatic for anybody who was not Achilles. "I'm in love with him."

"You are?"

Achilles drew back so that he could fix his eyes on Zagreus'. In the glow of Zagreus' laurels, the leaf Achilles wore as a pendant shone bright against his chest. "I've never been so sure of anything in my life. I just... I just love him. I love him in a way I'll never love anybody else."

He did not say he was certain in the way people sometimes did, where they were speaking it aloud to convince themselves. He said it as a simple fact: he loved Patroclus with his whole being.

"I want him so bad I'm going to lose my mind." He sank back against Zag's pillows with a *flumph* and a heavy sigh.

Zagreus' mind started to re-frame the way in which Patroclus had stormed away earlier that day. He had presumed lingering envy, but Patroclus rarely felt that anymore, especially since he had his own skill set that was just as formidable as Achilles or Zagreus. Rather than envy, could it have been *desire*?

Zagreus had a first flickering thought of *what if that desire was not just focused on Achilles, but on us both?* He ignored this feeling.

"Have you told him how you feel?" he asked Achilles.

"Of course not, I'm not *insane*," Achilles said, with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"That wouldn't be insane. You should talk about your feelings," Zagreus said, because it was something his mother had always recommended.

"I absolutely cannot do that," Achilles said, with the same kind of pure certainty with which he'd said, *I'm in love with him*.

"Oh." Zagreus watched him where he had flopped over, the spill of his golden curls glinting in the firelight, the rise and fall of his chest, heavier than usual with emotion. "Do you want to stay here tonight?"

Achilles shook his head. "No, he'll think something is wrong." He drew himself back into a sitting position. "I just... it felt like it was building up inside me, and if I didn't tell anyone, I was going to burn up."

"I understand," said Zagreus, who did not. Not yet. "I'll see you in the morning then, Achilles."

"Right. Yes. Thank you, Zagreus." Achilles surged forward and put his arms around Zagreus, and Zagreus became newly aware of how tall Achilles was getting when his face was pressed into Achilles' chest instead of his shoulder. Zagreus, in turn, looped his hands around Achilles' waist and sighed, breathing him in, then letting him go.

— — —

As far as Zagreus could tell, Achilles had not told Patroclus about his feelings, but it seemed his admission to Zagreus had softened the urgency somewhat. He was no longer so awkward around Patroclus, talking and laughing with him as usual, and when Zagreus joined them a few mornings later, he found Patroclus sitting between Achilles' legs, letting Achilles tie his hair back into a full head of little braids to keep the summer heat off him. It was something they learned to do years ago, Chiron teaching them how he did his own, modifying his instructions a little for Pat's tight curls.

Achilles tried it himself, usually one big braid down the middle of his back because he couldn't sit still for long, but his hair was so wispy and soft it came loose easily. Zagreus, himself, solved the problem of the heat by cropping his hair short, which was something Achilles and Patroclus found terribly offensive when he suggested it to them. They were both quite proud of their hair.

"It is too hot," Patroclus was telling Achilles, "I am going to shave."

"Noooo," Achilles whined, tying the last of his braids off and leaning his chin atop Patroclus' head to complain. "It looks handsome."

"You don't know how irritating it is."

"Zagreus," Achilles said, catching him and drawing him into their argument. "Tell Pat not to shave his beard off. Look at him, he looks nice." He put his hands on Patroclus' cheeks, turning his head to face Zagreus.

He did indeed look nice. Sometime over the winter, his beard finally came in full enough that he did not feel a need to constantly remove it. Achilles, himself, could not grow one, and Zag could not stand to have something on his face at all, much less when the weather turned warm. Pat's beard wasn't as long as Chiron's, but it looked nice on him, although it did soften the striking angles of his chin and jaw. Patroclus, himself, seemed to like it because it made him look more mature, which Zagreus could play on to convince him.

Zagreus gave Patroclus an over-long analytical look, as though taking this argument very seriously. "You know, it does actually make you look several years older than Achilles. You could be my age."

Achilles gave an offended gasp, and Patroclus a soft noise of consideration. "Well, that is convincing me to keep it," Patroclus said.

"Just because I *can't*—" said Achilles.

"Got you what you wanted, didn't I?" Zagreus asked Achilles, walking past and ruffling his hair.

"At what cost? He's going to be preening about that for weeks."

"I'm sure we'll suffer it. We endure you preening over something or another almost constantly," Zagreus said, which prompted an indignant squawk from Achilles' direction.

— — —

It was more than just that their closeness was renewed—there was no distance between them at all anymore. Physically, at least. Achilles could not talk about his feelings, but he could put an arm around Patroclus at every possible occasion, lean up against his side as they sat around an evening fire, lay his head in his lap while they enjoyed a rare afternoon off from training. He could also pin Patroclus for a few more seconds than was necessary whenever they wrestled, grinning down at him, looking for all the world like he was going to lean in and snatch a kiss.

This would have been blindingly obvious, if he only acted this way toward Patroclus. However, in a moment of cleverness that bordered on stupidity, Achilles was equally affectionate with Zagreus, deflecting any suspicion Patroclus may have had. Selfishly, Zagreus enjoyed this.

The summer days were stretching longer, and it was too hot at midday to do anything but swim or talk about how they wished they were swimming, but on clear evenings, the three of them would hike to one of the hills that was less populated with trees, watching Helios drag the sun below the horizon. This would inevitably end with the three of them all tangled in a pile together. Zagreus liked to lay his head on Achilles' chest, so that when he hummed out little responses to the birdcalls, Zagreus could feel his voice move through him. Patroclus curled up to Zagreus' side, with Achilles hand on his head or his shoulder.

Patroclus would rest his hand over the left side of Zagreus' chest, where he could feel his heart beat. He said Zagreus' pulse was stronger than a mortal man's, although this may have been because Zagreus' heart tended to pound when the two of them wrapped him up like this. Sometimes, Achilles ran his fingers through Zagreus' hair, and he drifted off entirely.

They would stay up there for hours before traveling back, often late into the night, walking by the light from Zagreus' crown and his feet. Chiron probably appreciated having some time without three boys to worry about.

Patroclus and Achilles both took shorter trips to the village below. Zagreus would have expected as much from Achilles, who seemed completely gone on Patroclus, always giving him soft looks when Patroclus wasn't watching. But it seemed Patroclus was returning those longing stares when Achilles

was turned away. Any dalliances they may have had with village youths were nothing in comparison to what they clearly felt for one another.

This was confirmed more firmly when Achilles was waylaid on his trip back, and missed their normal sunset hours together. Patroclus was clearly worried, toying with the beads he'd put into his hair, something he only did when he was too absent-minded to notice he was doing it.

"It was the storm this afternoon that slowed him down," Zagreus said.

"You think?"

"I am certain." He sat beside Patroclus, not sure whether their usual closeness was odd without Achilles around. Patroclus seemed too occupied with his thoughts to move closer or further away. He was frozen, looking at the pink and orange sky. "What else would it be?"

"I don't know. One of the girls. Or, Achilles said there was a boy before."

"That worries you?" Zagreus asked. He felt as if this conversation with Patroclus was like trying to pry open the delicate shell of some reluctant underwater creature, and one wrong slip of the blade he was using to lever it open would shatter it, but too little force wouldn't open it up.

Patroclus said, "it shouldn't," but he nodded his head as if, yes, it worried him. "Achilles is beautiful, everyone loves him. Everyone always has. He ought to love whomever he chooses back."

"You are just as beautiful," Zagreus said, in perfect honesty. Especially in this light. Patroclus' deep brown skin was highlighted in gold, all of his features standing out, each more striking than the last. His black-brown eyes were shaded by blacker lashes, his gaze casting down in a flicker of shyness.

"Do you think he could ever love me?"

Patroclus asked it quietly and addressed it to the breeze. It was as if he was not even talking to Zagreus, the question itself rhetorical, not wanting

answered.

Zagreus said, "yes."

Patroclus shook his head and said, "not like that."

"You need to talk to him," Zagreus pressed, because maybe if Achilles couldn't be convinced, Patroclus could.

"I talk to him every day of my life." Patroclus shifted, leaned in, pressed his forehead against the curve of Zagreus' shoulder. "How is it that this one thing sticks in my throat?"

"I don't know," Zagreus said, shifting, coming up to cup the back of his head and letting Patroclus lean on his shoulder instead of just slumping against him. He put an arm around Pat's back. "Sometimes the things that mean the most are the hardest to say, I think."

"That is true. You are a wise god, Zagreus."

"I am not a god."

"Mm. I'll believe it when I have proof." This exchange was well-worn, practically a joke by now.

Zagreus's attention was drawn by a particularly large oval leaf of his laurel drifting down into the divide between the two of them. Patroclus stretched out his hand, palm up. Despite Zagreus' leaves being notoriously difficult to catch and usually burning up like cinders before they even landed, this one dropped into Patroclus' palm like Zagreus himself had placed it there, remaining solid in his grasp.

"See that? That is not ordinary."

"I never said I was ordinary," Zagreus added.

Patroclus tried to tip the leaf into Zagreus' hand.

"Keep it," he said. "Achilles wears his all the time, you ought to have one as well. I care about you both more than anybody in the world."

"This autumn is going to be a particularly painful one, I think," Patroclus said. "I will miss you so much."

Zagreus said, "I hope the winter is short."

— — —

The winter was not short. In fact, it was the longest Zagreus had experienced so far, with storms that made him worry about his lads, living out in Chiron's cave. Chiron himself would be fine, he was a hardy being and he grew a thick winter coat on his horse's half every year. Although, perhaps Zagreus should worry for Chiron being trapped in that stew of unsaid feelings, stuck with two boys who both pined for one another all winter long.

When the weather finally broke, Persephone shooed him out the door, knowing precisely how stir-crazy he had gone. As always, Zagreus set off for Chiron's at a run.

When he reached the clearing, Chiron was the only one there, stacking up firewood in the little rocky outcropping of the cave that was the perfect place to hold it. His ears flicked in Zagreus' direction and his tail swished in a pleased way before he turned around to look at Zag.

"It is good to see you," he said. He no longer remarked on Zagreus getting taller, because it had not happened for several years.

"Are Achilles and Patroclus...?" Zagreus had the sudden intense worry that they were *gone*. That had happened with Aeneas; Zagreus came back for the spring and he had left, back down the mountain, to his faraway home. He had been sure Achilles and Patroclus wouldn't leave without telling him.

Chiron did not let these worries last.

"They are down by the river," he said, and relief flooded Zagreus.

"Then, do you mind if I...?" he motioned that he was going to drop his pack in the mouth of the cave and run.

"Not at all. They might actually catch something for dinner, if you assist."

Zagreus obediently grabbed his fishing pole before speeding off down the path to the river's edge.

He expected, as usual, to hear them before he saw them, laughing and fooling around and scaring off all the fish. The forest was quiet, however, except for the normal animal sounds, the telltale rush of the river growing closer at every moment.

The usual fishing perch was deserted, and so they must have gone further downriver. Zagreus searched, wondering why they would head deeper into the forest where there was hardly room to cast a line, but the other option was shimmying straight up a sheer rock face. He didn't doubt they *could*, but he'd rather check the less treacherous path first, even if it didn't make sense for a pair of people who were going fishing to take that route.

He only made it a short distance into the woods when he found Achilles and Patroclus beside a tree by the riverbank.

Well, more accurately, he found Achilles and Patroclus *against* a tree by the riverbank.

Even more accurately, he found Patroclus wedging Achilles up against a tree by the riverbank, the two of them kissing one another like they wanted to drown, and the river was a few too many steps away. Achilles had one hand clasped around Patroclus' shoulders and another at his hip, keeping Patroclus pressed flush to him *everywhere*, and Patroclus cupped Achilles' face to tilt him into a kiss that looked like it couldn't possibly be their first.

It seemed they figured out how to talk to one another about their feelings over the winter, now hadn't they?

Patroclus moved against Achilles with an easy roll of his hips, and Zagreus took a very deep breath, shook his head like an animal getting water out of

its fur, and turned right back around where he came from, thanks.

He caught a lot of fish, no thanks to the others, who came stumbling out of the forest a long while later, overjoyed to see Zagreus and pretending very much like they had not just been doing what they had been doing, even though they arrived with their hands clasped in one another's.

— — —

Over the next few days, Zagreus wondered when he'd stopped fondly thinking of Achilles and Patroclus as his lads, and when he started thinking of them as *men*.

As always, they had somehow managed to get even taller over the winter, and Zagreus was chest-height to them both now. Patroclus especially had filled out with muscular definition throughout his frame, and while Achilles still had his leaner sprinter's build, there was a grace to him that had been developing for some years now and had reached a devastatingly lovely peak. Every movement made him look like he was dancing.

Patroclus had kept the beard over the winter again, and it was longer now, impeccably neat, and made him look older, more masculine. At no point had Achilles ever managed to grow one, but he was wildly beautiful in a nymphlike way, and it wouldn't do to hide the pretty curve of his mouth or the sweep of his jaw anyhow. Their hair was unbound, all the way to mid-back, and they looked like a pair of lions with impressive manes. Achilles finally learned to keep enough oil in his hair for it to not become a massive puff of frizz. Instead, it hung in perfect curls, making him look more like a god than Zagreus ever had.

Achilles sang more than usual, young love delighting him, and his voice had become low, rich, and lovely. Patroclus, for his part, had learned to pitch his voice into a soft purr that made Zagreus shiver, usually used to tell stories around the fire at night, but it was all too easy to displace it to something more sensual.

And the two of them *together* were even more lovely. Zagreus couldn't get the image of them kissing out of his mind. He hadn't seen that again since

he'd arrived, but their usual contact was more tender. They brushed their fingers over one another's faces and had their hands all over one another when they leaned together.

Chiron was less enchanted with this than Zagreus was.

Their teacher had been the last to notice the pair's burgeoning affection for one another, and had said nothing to either of them, letting them think they were still hiding it. He let Zagreus in on his irritation with them, though. Once, while Achilles was taking far too long over a simple dressing of a minor wound Patroclus had sustained in training (including a lot of lingering touches to his chest even though he'd been scraped on the shoulder) Chiron gave an annoyed flick of his ear and said, "this is why, if I have two, they are usually brothers."

"You were never worried about me and one of the others?" Zagreus asked. He had been too young with Ajax, true, but Aeneas had been a few years later.

"No. Should I have?"

"Well, no," Zagreus said. He had never seen Aeneas the way he saw Achilles and Patroclus, as somebody to be desired.

Chiron gave a weary sigh. "If they are going to fawn over one another I can't stop them, but I'd rather they do it elsewhere."

"Tell me they're not trying to get their hands on one another in the cave."

Chiron's lips pressed together as his face took on a look of increasing horror. "No. But now you have me worried they will try."

Zagreus laughed loud enough that Achilles actually took his attention off Patroclus' chest, wanting in on the joke.

Later, Zagreus told them that if they wanted to get off, they ought to follow his example and sleep in a tent.

— — —

His open acknowledgment of their relationship made Achilles and Patroclus stop trying to hide it from him, if they ever had been intending to in the first place. They (mostly) behaved themselves around Chiron, but when they were with Zagreus alone, they walked with their hands in one another's, sat in each other's laps, and traded kisses like it was something they had been doing for some months now.

Zagreus realized belatedly that perhaps he should have been worried he'd be unwelcome in their sunset excursions these days, because the two of them might want to be together with no interruptions. But they didn't even blink before settling down with him on the first day the spring rains ended and the ground was dry enough to enjoy sitting down outdoors.

Their arrangement differed slightly, Achilles patting his lap and indicating for Zagreus to lay there, so that Patroclus could rest on his chest instead. Achilles still ran his fingers through Zagreus' hair, as always, the heavy, drowsy feeling this caused occasionally broken up by a zing of heat through his chest as he heard a soft, wet sound that he recognized as the two of them kissing. He wished he could turn his head to look, and then felt guilty about this particular desire.

And then, Achilles' gentle hands soothed him back into sleep.

He woke to a purple sky—they'd let him sleep almost until the sunset was over. Achilles' hand was not in his hair anymore, but Zagreus still lay on his lap, his head pillowed atop his own folded arms. He turned his head, and was sure the two of them would notice him doing it, if not for the feeling than for the shifting of light as his laurels turned with him.

They were *sufficiently* distracted.

Achilles' hands were not on Zagreus' head because both of them were in Patroclus' hair instead. They were kissing, deeper than the little pecks he'd seen them exchange, and this time, Zagreus was close enough to see more than just a distant press of mouths in a sort of way that acknowledged 'this is a kiss'. He could see their lips slide together, their tongues, could hear uneven breaths and the softest little moan from Pat. All of it was lit by

Zagreus' laurels, the matching pendants they wore caught between their chests.

He saw Achilles' teeth snag Patroclus' lower lip, Patroclus' brow twisting in irritation as he pulled away from the tug. "Ow," Patroclus hissed. "Your teeth are sharp."

"Hush, you're going to—oh, Zagreus. You're awake."

He hadn't thought to pretend to be sleeping. That would require closing his eyes, and he couldn't look away.

"Wasn't really sure when to politely interrupt," he said, trying to pass it off. "Or how, honestly. 'Hey, you ought to take your tongues out of each other's mouths before we have to walk back in complete darkness'?"

"To be fair, it is never complete darkness with you," Patroclus said.

Zagreus, feeling the moment was broken, pushed up and off Achilles' lap. "Come along, then," he said. "I'll lead you back, don't fret."

"Will we wake Chiron?" Achilles asked, pulling Patroclus to his feet.

"Probably. Damn. He's already mad at us for the whole, ah." Patroclus searched for words.

"Falling in love?" Achilles suggested.

"Well, I don't think he's mad about *that*, more, 'falling in love while also being young and then sometimes touching each other too much'." Patroclus trotted a few steps to get closer to Zagreus, who had been trying to ease out of their conversation. "Do you think we touch each other too much?"

Zagreus, despite being very able to see where his feet were, tripped over a tree root and had to catch himself.

No, his traitorous mind suggested, *you could actually touch each other much more and that would be completely fine, and please do it somewhere I can watch you do it.*

"I couldn't say," he said instead. "If you don't want to wake Chiron, you could stay with me." It would be a tight fit, but they could all pile up on one another again.

"Would you mind?" Achilles asked.

"No, that would be... nice." He headed toward his little campsite instead of the cave. It was truly dark now, Zagreus having become the only light. "I'll just put myself between you two, that way you'll keep your hands off one another," he joked.

Achilles muttered something that almost made Zagreus trip again. He could've sworn it was, *"I'll just put my hands on you."*

— — —

Zagreus was aware of the fact that his tent was not large, which was why it functioned only as a bedroom and nothing else, but it seemed so much smaller when both Achilles and Patroclus were crowded in with him. True to his request, they lay on either side of him, and rather than facing politely away, they were both turned towards him, possibly making eyes at one another over him. Zagreus wouldn't know. He was facing the roof of the tent and resolutely not looking at either of them.

"Zagreus," Achilles said into the dark. Barely a whisper, but it was enough to draw his attention, as he was still wide awake.

"Yes?" he asked the ceiling.

"There was something we wanted to talk to you about... during the autumn, when Pat and I first, um." There was an extended pause, and then Achilles said, "admitted our feelings for one another," while Patroclus said, "had sex."

Achilles had to reach over Zagreus' chest to bat at Patroclus.

"Stop, finish what you're telling him," Patroclus said, snatching Achilles' hand. He shoved him back, but Achilles' palm still rested over Zagreus'

ribcage. It was still, because Zagreus wasn't breathing. He was only vaguely aware of the fuzzy perimeter of the reality of lovemaking, but imagining the two of them—he *couldn't* breathe.

"It's not just Pat," Achilles said. "And for him, it's not just me. It's also you, we also—we want you."

Zagreus picked up breathing only because he had to, very slow and shallow.

"We love you," Achilles said.

Patroclus' hand joined Achilles' on his chest. "You've no idea how much we love you."

Zagreus' breathing hitched, unsteady, his heart thrumming even louder than usual.

"We weren't sure..." Achilles' voice sounded uncharacteristically small. "I thought maybe you saw us as kids still, like... annoying little—I don't know. Pat tells me, um."

"You've never treated us that way, even when we acted like a couple of brats," Patroclus said.

"Zagreus!?"

It wasn't until Achilles said his name with immense alarm that Zagreus realized he was crying.

He sat up, scrubbing the tears off his face. "No, no, you haven't upset me, I'm sorry. Don't worry. I'm fine." Patroclus' hand settled on him again, a bit tentative, passing over his back. "*I love you both so much.*" He said it in a staggered rush, the word all stringing together.

"In... what sort of way, exactly?" Patroclus asked.

"The kind where I—" Too much holding his breath had left him at a loss for air, and between words he had to take in desperate breaths. "The kind where

I see you two kissing and it's all I want—but I'm not sure whether I want to never look away or I want to kiss you, or him, or both—both, I think."

"We want that, too." It was Achilles, sounding closer to his ear with every word. "Hey. Zag." He tucked his nose into the crook between Zagreus' neck and shoulder, trying to root out his hidden face, nudging him like a needy puppy asking for attention. "We want to kiss you, too."

There was something overwhelming about those words, in particular—they acknowledged that he was *wanted*, in this very specific way. It was like something had been struck dead center in Zagreus' core. Like a spark had been lit. *Oh gods, they want me. They want me.*

"I've never—" he said.

"I know," Patroclus said. He shifted around to Zagreus' front, cupping his face and helping to lift his head from where it was buried against his knees. The first thing he saw when he lifted his eyes was Patroclus' face, just as lovely in the warm light from Zagreus' laurels as he was in the sunset. "We don't have to."

"I want to," Zagreus said. He licked his lower lip and then drew it between his teeth.

"Who first?" Achilles asked, still close enough that his breath tickled Zagreus' neck when he spoke.

"Huh?" Zagreus was lost in the deep dark of Patroclus' eyes, in the way his laurels made flecks of golden light reflect off them.

"Who do you want to kiss first?" Achilles specified.

"Oh," he breathed. That warmth inside him was almost flickering, squirmy now. "I think... would it be strange if I wanted to watch you two do it again, first?"

"I'm sure it could be educational," Patroclus said, his mouth splitting in a grin. "We finally get to teach *you* something."

"I would never say no to that," Achilles said. "You're sure?"

"Yes, please."

They didn't move away from him. Achilles scooted forward so that he could reach, but Patroclus was still directly in front of Zagreus, his hand resting atop Zagreus' knees, and Achilles sat so that his thigh pressed against Zagreus'. Achilles' hair still brushed against Zagreus' shoulder, and his hand was planted in the bedding somewhere just behind Zag.

Patroclus brushed one of Achilles' wispy curls away before his fingers swept down to hold onto Achilles' chin. He bypassed Achilles for just a second, to brush a kiss to Zagreus' cheek. "Watch closely, Zagreus."

As if he could look away.

They melted together, Achilles tipping his head to press closer, before realizing that the angle would keep Zagreus from seeing anything but the side of his head. He pulled back for just a second, the soft wet noise of it absolutely thrilling Zagreus, and tilted the other direction, so Zagreus could get a very, very clear look at the way their lips met.

He had never seen anybody really kiss before these two. Of course, his mother kissed him on his head and his cheeks and his nose when he was a child, and he had seen the nymph exchange similarly brief kisses. But he'd never watched anybody kiss as deeply as Patroclus and Achilles did. He didn't expect it to last so long. He didn't expect them to be constantly in motion, either, mouths and hands moving, chins jutting forward to press into each other, lips parting, tongues over each other's lips.

Arousal had never felt quite so like an arrow-strike to his gut, but Eros seemed to be aiming for Zagreus today. Achilles made all these soft noises, *ah*, *nnh*, *mmnh*, and Patroclus made low hums into his mouth, his hand squeezing on Zagreus' knee as Achilles' tongue passed over the fullness where he'd bitten Pat's lip earlier. Achilles pursed his lips over Patroclus' lower lip, sucking, the wet noise it made sending heat pooling through Zagreus and into his belly.

“Oh, gods.” Zagreus pressed his hand over his own mouth, his knees spreading a little wider as his body reacted to the scene before him. It dislodged Patroclus’ hand, which slipped down Zagreus’ inner thigh, his palm hot against Zagreus’ skin. *”Ah!”*

Pat drew his hand back and pulled away from Achilles. “Are you alright?” His lower lip was glossy and wet. Achilles, on his part, was flushed darker than he ever went while they were training.

“I—oh, you two just—put your hand back, I need—”

Patroclus set his hand on Zagreus’ thigh again. “Here?”

“More.” Zagreus barely knew what he meant.

Patroclus’ hand crept upward, cupping Zagreus’ cock through his clothes. “Here?” he asked again, although it was unnecessary, Zagreus was pushing into his hand and making it very clear.

“Oh! Yes! I—Achilles, please—”

“Please, what?” Achilles asked, and Zagreus just heaved out a few noisy, wordless breaths, impossibly overcome.

“Kiss him,” Patroclus instructed. He removed his hand from Zagreus’ crotch, which allowed Achilles to swing a leg over and get into his lap, cupping Zagreus’ face in his hands. He was so aroused his eyes watered.

“You want a kiss?” Achilles asked, a little too breathy for teasing.

“Please!”

“Good, yeah. Come here.” Achilles leaned in, his nose bumping against Zagreus’, and Zagreus felt his breath for just a second before he felt his lips.

It was brief, at first. Achilles pulled back just a bit. “Softer, okay? Don’t purse your lips so much.”

“Wha—“ Zagreus was cut off halfway through his question by Achilles’ mouth again, more pressure this time. Those pretty lips he’d been admiring felt smooth and warm against his own, and Achilles’ thumbs stroked Zagreus’ cheeks.

He licked Zagreus’ lower lip like he’d done to Patroclus, and Zagreus grasped Achilles’ waist. His arousal was stemmed a little by his focus on the kiss, but when Achilles shifted forward, his thigh rubbed against Zagreus’ cock, Zagreus’ mouth went slack and he moaned a little into the kiss. The pressure felt unbelievably good, so different to Zagreus rubbing up against one of his pillows or grinding against his own hand.

Achilles took this opportunity to lick into Zagreus’ mouth, his hot wet tongue quite confusing for a second, but making Zagreus shiver as it ran over the roof of his mouth. Achilles shifted forward, and Zagreus could feel the jut of Achilles’ own erection against his hip.

"Achilles," Zagreus groaned, his head tipping back. "Achilles, can you—"

"Mmn?"

"Can you—" He remembered Patroclus pressing Achilles against the tree by the riverbank, rolling his hips ever so slowly against Achilles'. Zagreus tried this motion, planting one hand on the pillows behind him so that he could rock upward, grinding his cock against Achilles' thigh. It felt divine, the fabric of his chiton already soaking through with blots of pre-come. "Like that, oh."

Zagreus' head tipped back when Achilles moved against him once more, purposefully rubbing his thigh against Zagreus' cock. When he ground back down, Zagreus once again felt Achilles' erection against his hip.

Holding himself up became a chore, and so he fell back, and Achilles fell forward, moving with his usual sinuous grace atop Zagreus. He had realigned their hips, so that his cock pressed against Zagreus', and it was too much fabric, not enough sensation, not enough of Achilles.

Zagreus dug his forefinger into the knot of his belt and yanked it free, and Achilles seemed to get the idea. He was helped along by Patroclus, who appeared behind him, stripping Achilles' tunic off over his head and then tossing his own somewhere. Zagreus wanted to see more of Patroclus naked. He was distracted, in the moment, by Achilles, looking like a god himself, unashamed by his nakedness, proud and lovely, his cock standing in a pretty curve toward his belly.

Achilles tipped his head to the side so he could speak to Patroclus. "Look at him," he said. "Fuck."

Zagreus knew the meaning of a curse—nymphs were notoriously foul-mouthed and even Chiron or Persephone could be prompted to swear, although with lighter expletives than this one—but he had never heard somebody swear like this, voice dripping with lust.

Achilles barely touched him, just tangled his hands with Zagreus', but he shifted to rub his cock against Zag's again, the contact made all the more electrifying for their lack of clothing. Zagreus arched beneath him, pushing into the touch, then bent the other direction and struggled to look at the place where they touched, the slide of their cocks together.

Patroclus was behind Achilles, his thighs spread to either side of Achilles' and his head on Achilles' shoulder. He was kissing Achilles' neck, and Achilles was tipping his head to the side to allow this, and also allowing Patroclus to reach around and touch his chest, his thumbs brushing Achilles' nipples. Zagreus squeezed Achilles' fingers tighter. He knew the feeling of an orgasm building, the pressure in his belly, and with the two of them before him, it wouldn't take long. He wished he could draw it out, could spend hours beneath them, but he was too damn close.

Patroclus was rocking in a way that made Zagreus realize he, too, was rubbing up against Achilles, the three of them grinding together in a mess of sweat and pleasure. Zagreus could feel the skin on his thighs sticking to Achilles' with perspiration, their palms getting clammy, but it didn't matter. He watched the sway of Achilles' laurel-leaf pendant as it rocked against his chest while he was moved by Patroclus' thrusting and his own. His flush

went down his neck and onto his chest, and Zagreus was completely certain he matched.

Achilles' rocking made an uptick in tempo, until he was humping Zagreus rabbit-fast, stupid with impending orgasm, not worried for a second about dragging things out. Zagreus was of the same mind. He wanted to come, now. Every drag of Achilles' cock over his pulled the tension within him tighter and tighter, and he squeezed Achilles' hands again, trying to tell him that tension was about to snap.

He couldn't say so in as many words.

He threw his head back and groaned aloud as he came, his orgasm rushing through him as Achilles continued to grind, his thrusts against Zagreus turning slipperier as his cock rubbed through Zagreus' come.

Zagreus was so sensitive he thought he might be crying, and Achilles was so beautiful he wanted to cry even more. Patroclus was really kneading at Achilles' chest now, squeezing so tight Achilles' skin went white where his fingertips dug in. Achilles did not seem to mind. If anything, his breathy noises reached a new pitch as Patroclus held him so tight he ought to break.

"Fuck," Achilles swore again as his thrusts stuttered and Zagreus felt the warm rush of Achilles spilling all over his belly, adding to the mess he'd been fucking through. In the light of Zagreus' laurels, Achilles' ribs stood out with every rapid in-out heave of his breath. He was still moving, slightly. Patroclus was moving him.

Achilles tipped his head to the side, shifting Patroclus up and away from his neck, and Patroclus took a long moment to catch on before he finally met Achilles' mouth in a kiss. It was the sloppiest one yet, spit messing Achilles' chin and glimmering in Patroclus' beard, something that should have been disgusting but 'disgusting' changed shapes when Zagreus was running his fingers through his and Achilles' commingled release on his belly and thinking about how this was him, this was proof that his Achilles loved Zagreus and had made love to Zagreus.

Patroclus' mouth dropped away from Achilles', and he looked Zagreus dead in the eye as he came, exhaling a prayer or a plea. "Gods."

The only god there was Zagreus, his laurels flaring bright as that mantle he'd carefully demurred all these years settled pleasantly on his shoulders. He would be their god. Theirs alone.

"Damn it, Achilles," Patroclus said after, still catching his breath. "I haven't even got to kiss him, and you already made us all come."

As if Achilles was the only one at fault, there. Achilles laughed at this, leaning heavily to the side and laying down beside Zagreus, following the dirty path of Zagreus' fingers through the smears on his stomach. "Then kiss him now," he said.

"Please," Zagreus begged, drawing Patroclus in. He was a glorious mess, his beard and hair mussed, sweat at his temples and his eyes shining in the dim light.

He lay atop Zagreus' chest, a heavy weight that pressed him down and made him want to grind up again. Any more of that, and Zagreus would get hard again. "You," Patroclus told him, "are incredible. Do you know how pretty you looked, squirming under Achilles, letting him rub your cock?"

Who taught him to talk like that?

Zagreus answered in a wordless gasp.

"How beautiful," Patroclus said. "How perfect. How divine." After each of these proclamations, none of which Zagreus thought suited him, Patroclus kissed him. Once on his left cheek, once on his right, and the final met his mouth, on the left corner of it before Patroclus realigned and kissed him fully, the plush of his lips swollen from Achilles' earlier attentions. Achilles, invulnerable there as everywhere else, didn't get marks even when Patroclus nipped him.

Patroclus' hand skimmed down Zagreus' side, over his ribs, to his hip. He paused and drew back, trying to gauge Zagreus' expression. "Would you?"

Like to go again?"

"Just don't stop kissing me," Zagreus told him.

This time, they pressed Zagreus between them, so he could feel Patroclus' cock against his front, the way Achilles had been before, and Achilles' against his back. They were pressed against him flush, which would have overwhelmed him the first time, but was pleasantly overpowering now, Patroclus meeting him for a kiss every so often but mostly needing to pant for breath just as badly as Zagreus did. Although they were entirely more experienced than Zagreus, the two of them were still young men, with all that entailed for their stamina.

"Zagreus," Achilles moaned, leaning in and brushing his lips over Zagreus' neck.

"Yes, kiss me there—"

Achilles' mouth was hot against Zagreus' neck and his teeth were sharp, scoring hot red lines across his skin. He squeezed Zagreus' ass, then shimmied his hips lower, pressing down on Zagreus' thigh so that they were tight together and then putting his cock between.

Gods, Zagreus wondered how that felt—was it better than a fist around your cock? Achilles was moving faster now that he'd found a place he liked, and his hand wedged between Zagreus and Patroclus' chests to squeeze Zag's pectoral, which also felt amazing. Was there anything they could do to him that didn't feel amazing?

Patroclus kissed him again, still desperate and hungry for it even though they had been feasting on one another for some time now. Zagreus wanted the taste of them in his mouth forever. It wasn't a particularly sweet or good flavor, but it was them, and he was so in love he could cry all over again.

He wasn't sure how long they went on that way, grinding and kissing and turning the air in the tent humid with their exertions. Zagreus' laurels flared more when he was aroused, growing faster than they could burn out,

covering the pillows like golden leaf litter. They stuck in Patroclus' hair and glimmered among the black of his curls.

Patroclus nuzzled beneath his jaw, purposefully itching Zagreus with his beard and making him giggle even as he kept moving fretfully against Patroclus. "You mark up so pretty," he said. "Achilles is invulnerable and I am dark enough that it doesn't show, but you are all pink. Look, here, his teeth left bruises. You're ours, and it's written on your skin."

Zagreus responded with a very coherent, "augh!" He kept moving against Patroclus and Achilles, chasing pleasure wherever he felt it.

He felt a warm, sticky wetness on his inner thighs and didn't realize what it was until Achilles said, "Zagreus," in the same way he'd said fuck.

"I—oh—Achilles, did you just—?"

He received a dopey, fucked-out giggle in response.

Then, Achilles' fingers reached between his thighs, where his cock had been, and smeared his fingers through the mess there, slipping upward and squeezing his balls while Patroclus continued to rub against him—in concert, they were so much.

"M close," Zagreus said, leaning his forehead against Pat's.

"Come for us, then," Patroclus said. "Let us see how good we make you feel, love."

Zagreus whined, pressed between them and losing his mind, the feeling of their breath and their sweat and their hands on him driving him to that edge again, again, he wasn't going to last long enough. He wanted this to go on forever.

When he came, he buried his face in Pat's chest and felt the skin-warm metal of the pendant—which had come from Zagreus' own crown—against his cheek.

"Look how red you get, gods, you're pretty," Achilles was saying.

"I do not," Zagreus grumbled.

"Yes—" Achilles paused to yawn so widely it made Zagreus want to echo him, "—you do. Pat, do you want a hand?"

"If you please," Patroclus said, the only one of them still yet to come a second time.

"Can I?" Zagreus said, without really any idea what he was asking.

"Yes, please."

"What do you need?"

Patroclus buried his head in the pillows. He had been perfectly confident talking dirty to Zagreus but it took him a long moment to get out, "just touch me. Do it like you're getting yourself off, that's all I need."

He obeyed—Patroclus' cock was thicker than his, and he had to readjust his grip for the unfamiliar angle, but he had Pat groaning and pushing into his hand, so he must have gotten a thing or two right.

"Take your head out of the pillows, Pat, let him see your pretty face," Achilles said.

Patroclus obliged, and gods, was Zagreus thankful Achilles had asked. He gave Zagreus a lovely smile that only dropped when his mouth opened on a moan because Zagreus was making him feel that good.

"Zagreus," Patroclus said, and it was all over.

They were a wreck, after. Zagreus had one of his own leaves stuck to his belly thanks to the amount of, er, fluids that were on him. He was thankful he left a bit of water and a cloth for washing up in his tent, although he could scarcely keep his eyes open long enough to use it. Achilles was already asleep.

He stayed awake long enough to tend to his boys, who cuddled closer to one another in his brief absence but then separated enough to give Zagreus

back his space between them.

It was like he belonged between them, with their arms around him.

He settled in warm, letting them hold him.

— — —

Zagreus woke up with hair in his mouth.

This seemed to be a standard hazard of sharing a bed with Achilles and Patroclus. Actually, Zagreus wasn't sure whose hair was in his mouth. Maybe both. They were curled up on his chest, like each of his pectorals were pillows.

He knew it was morning from the quality of light bleeding in from the edges of the tent, but he wasn't sure how high the sun had risen. Given last night's activities, he wouldn't be surprised they had overslept. And, given Chiron's general perceptiveness, he wouldn't be surprised he knew not to stick his head in and wake them himself. This was particularly helpful because all of them were still stark naked, and Zagreus didn't think his tent would ever stop smelling like sex. Zagreus did not actually mind that fact.

Patroclus, on his left, was the first to lift his head. Zagreus was used to the way he looked after sleep—when the weather was particularly poor, Zagreus stayed with them overnight in the cave. Seeing Pat's usual slow, bleary blinks and wide yawn tucked into his elbow politely felt different when it came after a night like that.

"Good morning," Zagreus said to him, to which he received a sleepy grunt of acknowledgement. Patroclus was not generally emotive upon first waking.

Achilles was, however, and woke to kiss Zagreus on the cheek and then the jaw and then the neck, which was likely to start something if he tried to continue. Zagreus petted his hair, and when that didn't slow him down, Zagreus squeezed the back of his neck to get his attention.

"Stop that, or we'll never get out of bed," Zagreus said.

"Good," Achilles said, and kissed him on the mouth, distracting him for an indeterminable length of time.

"Chiron's going to be mad," Zagreus argued weakly, but Patroclus decided he needed a kiss, too, and how on earth was Zagreus to deny him?

"Just one more," Achilles said, and then gave him several more kisses, actually, until it was probably noon.

— — —

Chiron was mad, but Zagreus weathered his disappointment fine, still floating on last night.

And then, Chiron dropped something on them that made all that happy, bubbling pleasure fade away.

"Thetis is on the mountain," Chiron said. "She is meeting with my daughter now, but she is here to look for Achilles."

He sat them down to explain.

There was war brewing in the mortal kingdoms, spurred on by gods. Zagreus had never really concerned himself with these sorts of things; even though Chiron told them the history of the rest of the world, Zagreus' whole universe was this mountaintop. Zagreus was naive enough to ask what could harm them while they were on the mountain, safe with Chiron, and was informed that, obviously, this was the first place the soldiers were going to look for Achilles.

Well, perhaps the second, after Achilles' home. His real home. Phthia.

Achilles and Patroclus took this news with the same dawning horror Zagreus did, but also a sort of resoluteness, their shoulders drawing back, eyes dead set ahead. This was an eventuality they had been prepared for, he realized.

Of course they were. Whyever would they be training to be warriors up here if not to fight a war?

"I'm going with him," Patroclus said.

"Thetis won't allow it." Whether Chiron had already discussed as much or was predicting Thetis' behavior himself, Zagreus had no idea. He seemed to know Achilles' mother in the way that someone knew a person they had heard about often but had never met until today. It was better than Zagreus knew her, so Chiron's surety about this was upsetting.

"I don't care. I won't leave his side."

"Nor will I," Zagreus said.

Both of them turned to look at him. Zagreus knew he was shaking a little, hopefully they could not see it. He had a healthy fear of leaving the mountain, impressed upon him by his mother, and then by Chiron. But he was more afraid of losing them. Even after all their training, Zagreus was a more skilled warrior than them both. He could protect them. He could keep them safe, like a patron god ought to.

"Listen." Chiron bent lower to talk to them, something he didn't normally do. He drew them in close, placing a hand on Achilles' shoulder, and one on Zagreus', trapping Patroclus between them until they were all huddled together. "Achilles' mother is going to take him. There is nothing I can do to stop her. But I do know where she is taking him. You will not be able to go after him immediately, because anyone looking for Achilles will follow Patroclus, but you will be able to go to him eventually."

"I'll talk to my mother," Achilles said. "I'll convince her that they need to come."

Chiron shook his head. "You can try," he said, but he seemed uncertain. "But there are few forces in this world more unstoppable than a mother who is afraid for the life of her child."

Achilles' face fell. Zagreus knew he would make an effort, but that he was already partly certain that his mother would not be convinced.

"In that respect," Chiron continued. "Zagreus. You are going to have a task before you as well: getting your own mother to agree to this."

— — —

Thetis looked like no nymph Zagreus had ever seen. She was golden like Achilles, but had scales like a fish, and her hair had a texture that was almost oily like an otter's fur instead of fluffy like Achilles' curls. But her eyes shone the same way Achilles' did, and her ears wiggled the same way Achilles' did, and even though she said she was going to take him away from them, it was hard to hate her.

"Everything I do, I do for my son and his safety," she told them. "I would hope you want him to be safe and whole as much as I do."

They both felt duly chagrined, their desire to keep Achilles at their sides seeming childish while facing life or death consequences.

Achilles was still absolutely indignant. "Where would be safer than with the two of them?" he kept asking. Thetis would not be swayed.

"There is one thing all of them ought to do before you leave with Achilles," Chiron said to Thetis. "The goddess Persephone has made her dwelling on this mountain for some twenty years, and the boys should see her before they leave. Her blessing would benefit them all. And she is Zagreus' mother. She would be inclined to help anybody he cared about."

Thetis gave a somber nod. "You must not leave for more than a day," she said to Achilles. It would have sounded demanding, except there was a tinge of fearful desperation in her voice. "And you must come back alone. I cannot keep you safe if those who pursue you are coming after three men, not one."

"I promise," Achilles said, truthful, but defeated.

— — —

Zagreus wasted no time in taking Achilles and Patroclus to his mother's side of the mountain.

"You make this journey every year?" Patroclus asked, panting as he struggled to catch up. There was a longer way around to Chiron's side, but Zagreus took the faster route, even if it involved climbing up and down a lot of boulders, jumping over rivers carved deep into the rock, and clambering along a sheer cliff's-edge. Achilles kept up better, not because he was any nimbler, but because he had no worries about scraping himself on the rock.

"You now understand why I can only do it when the weather is clear," Zagreus replied. His shoulder and neck were a little sore where Achilles had bitten him last night.

"Fuck, yeah, I do."

Still, they followed. They didn't speak much. Achilles' imminent absence felt like a wound digging into all three of them.

They reached Persephone's cottage slightly before sundown, and with Achilles and Patroclus at his side, it was as if Zagreus was seeing his childhood home anew.

There was a small cluster of nymphs curled in the meadow just outside the homestead, lazily tangled sort of like how Zagreus and Achilles and Patroclus liked to lay together. Achilles' eyes caught on their forms, and Zagreus understood why—nymphs went about most their business in the nude. It was something he was used to, but clearly Achilles was not. Patroclus looked politely away, but kept snatching glances, which was less courteous but better than Achilles' open ogling.

They didn't have long to enjoy the passerby, though, caught up by the approach to the cottage itself.

Every inch of this place was bursting with life. Pelion itself was already painted in saturated colors, the brightest green woods, the clearest blue

rivers, but Persephone's cottage was all the more overwhelming a riot of all things living. It had been a long time since Zagreus had been there in the summer, to see everything at the height of its flourish. Patroclus was trying not to step on the flowers that carpeted the walkway, but this was impossible. He didn't know they would spring back to life right away anyhow. Achilles was too busy looking around to even realize what was beneath his feet.

Persephone was knelt in the garden bed right by the house, her skirts tied up and out of the way in a knot so she wouldn't get dirt on them, yet somehow there was soil on her plain linen clothing anyhow, and a streak of it across her cheek. She stood when she saw them coming, and gave a curious tilt of her head. Today, she was crowned in lilacs and little white star-flowers sprouted from her braid.

"Zagreus? It's early."

Patroclus bowed, looking like he wanted to kneel. Achilles stood completely still for once in his life.

"Mother," Zagreus said. "Something's... something's happened."

She brushed soil from her hands. "You'd best come inside, then."

— — —

She made them all a cup of herbal tea and sat them around the table, then asked, "which one of you is which?"

Patroclus cocked his head, blinking, confused.

"He's Patroclus," Zagreus explained. "He's Achilles."

"You thought I might be Achilles?" Patroclus asked.

"You look like you could be a demigod, young Patroclus." She smiled, and he fidgeted, looking undeniably flustered. Achilles elbowed him in the side.

— — —

Zagreus did not expect to cry when he told his mother what had happened. She seemed to see it coming before he did, maybe in some catch of his voice or blotchiness in his cheeks. She was holding him before the tears even started to fall.

"If you are going to go after him, some things need to change," Persephone said. She looked at Achilles and Patroclus, then, not Zagreus. "How much do they know about your parentage?"

"As much as I do," Zagreus said, because he had never seen any reason not to tell them.

Achilles had always thought it was strange that Zagreus did not know precisely who his father was, and often tried to guess. All Zagreus knew was that he was a Chthonic god, and that his mother had lived in the Underworld for a time, and that his grandmother did not like to talk about it. Achilles knew the name of even more Chthonic gods than Zagreus did, but mortals knew so little about the appearance of the gods who lived below, it was impossible to determine just based on Zagreus' traits which differed from his mother's.

"His father—my husband—is Hades."

That had always been top of list when Achilles was playing guessing games. Patroclus and Zagreus exchanged a look. Patroclus said, "so—wait—Achilles was right?"

Zagreus gave a helpless shrug. Even as the words left his mother's mouth, he felt partly like he'd known it was true all along. Somehow, it still didn't mean anything. It was a fact, but in the way of distant facts that meant nothing to him until they actually applied, like that there were impossible numbers of mortal kingdoms beyond Mt. Pelion.

"So, what exactly does that mean?" Zagreus asked. "I'm the same as always."

"It means that if there truly are Olympians involved in this conflict, as you say, then they are likely to recognize you," Persephone said. "It also means

that you are much more powerful than you know."

"I always thought I wasn't a god," Zagreus said.

"You are, my son." She stroked his cheek, deliberate in her gentleness. "No one yet knows what your divinity entails, but you are divine. And there are things about you that any of your Olympian relatives would notice that resemble your father."

"Are Hades' feet also on fire?" Patroclus surmised.

Persephone laughed, but it was a bit distant. "Yes, that much is true." She kept her hand on Zagreus' shoulder, but turned to address Achilles and Patroclus in specific. "The Olympian gods receive much of their power from mortals' worship of and devotion to them. Were Zagreus to be raised by his father, he likely would have had all the trappings of a prince—including attention from those mortal souls that live in his father's realm."

Zagreus, for one, could not imagine being a prince. Princes were men like Achilles, not like him.

Persephone continued. "Instead he has been kept here, on this mountain... and you two are some of the only mortals who have ever known him. However, changing one's shape is a base-level ability for most gods. If you were to pledge your loyalty to Zagreus as your patron, he would likely be able to accomplish such a thing."

Achilles' response was instant. "Of course. Absolutely. It would be my honor."

Persephone held up a hand. "But. You must understand—Zagreus, this is dangerous." She looked him in the eye in a very similar way to how Achilles had looked at Thetis—aware that his mind was made up but determined to put an effort into changing it. "You may be a god, but you bleed like a mortal, and we have no idea whether you can temporarily die like one, too, and whether that will land you in the halls of your father's House. If you die..." and here, she spoke as if tears were caught in her throat. "If you die, you may end up separated from me for longer than you intend."

"I will be careful," Zagreus said.

Almost before he'd finished speaking, Achilles cut in. "I will keep him safe. Just as I would Patroclus, I will make sure no harm comes to him, as long as he is by my side."

Persephone gave him a smile, but it didn't quite show in her eyes. "I will hold you to that, noble Achilles."

"I will protect him, too," Patroclus said. "Both with my sword and with my words. It will be difficult to keep people from finding out what he is, but I hope that you can trust me to bear his secrets."

"I do, Patroclus. Zagreus tells me much about you and I know that you are quick with your mind." She stood, and brought Zagreus with her, standing in front of the hearth in his mother's home. "You must make these promises to Zagreus, as well."

They knelt before him, and he felt an urge to drop to his knees, too, not wanting them to lower themselves. But they were both smiling, first at one another, then at him.

Achilles spoke first.

"Lord Zagreus." When he addressed Zagreus in this way, his voice thrummed with a power to it that Zagreus had never felt before. It ran through the core of him, and warmed him from the inside out. "I pledge myself to you. My heart and sword are yours, my victories are your victories."

Zagreus couldn't help a little gasp as Achilles' pledge filled him with an energy he couldn't quite describe. It was because Achilles spoke a prayer, Zagreus realized. A prayer to his god.

"I pledge myself to you, lord Zagreus," Patroclus echoed, "and promise you all the honor and worship that entails. I swear to you that I will be your devoted servant and your champion as long as I live."

Was this what the gods on Olympus felt whenever they sensed a mortal's intercessions? No wonder their power seemed so infinite.

Zagreus did sink to his knees, now, overcome with it all. He closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them, it was like he was looking through flame, like the fire on his soles and his laurels was burning through the insides of him. He touched his fingertips to both of their chests, on the leaves of his laurels he'd left there.

"My power is yours," he said, the words coming through him like it was somebody else using his voice. He didn't know what he was going to say next but it slipped out of him unbidden. "Let this exchange bind us, my blood and your hearts. My princes, my champions, you honor me with your devotion."

When he pulled his hands away and the three of them rose, Achilles and Patroclus each had a red mark on their chests, like Zagreus' power had turned their pendants red-hot and branded the shape of his laurel leaves into their skin.

He snapped from his reverie, although it was hard for him to keep from feeling drunk and dizzy on this power. "Oh! Did I hurt you?" He reached as if to touch them again, but drew his hand back, fearing that he might hurt them again.

"Not badly," Patroclus said.

Achilles was tipping his chin, trying to get a look at the mark on his own chest. "I don't know how you did it. You shouldn't be able to—not to me, right?"

Zagreus gave a helpless shrug.

"Well, it doesn't hurt," Achilles agreed, although he was wincing a little. He was unused to pain, even in the mildest amounts.

"It will take me some time to train Zagreus on how to change his shape to match a mortal's," Persephone said. "Achilles, your mother will want you

returned to her as quickly as possible. But if you go now, it will be dark before you arrive, and I am certain she would rather you safe and sound, if a bit late. You three should stay the night here."

"Thank you, my lady Persephone," Achilles said, more princely and polite than Zagreus had ever seen him act.

They all piled into Zagreus' bed in the loft, which was slightly larger than his tent. He was once again between them, Patroclus with his head on Zagreus' chest and Achilles on his side with his fingertips making the lightest of passes over Zagreus' throat.

Anything they spoke aloud would be within Persephone's earshot and Zagreus did not want to disturb his mother, so he kept things to a whisper. "Did you feel it, earlier? That surge of power when you prayed to me?"

"Not when we prayed to you," Achilles said. "But when you blessed us in return, I felt stronger than I ever have."

"They say a god's love is a dangerous thing to have," Patroclus said. "But I do not think a lot of gods are like our Zagreus."

Achilles touched the mark on his chest. He'd been doing that a lot, since Zagreus left it there. This made sense to Zagreus—it was the first and only mark to mar his perfect skin. He confessed to wanting a mirror to look at it, not because he was afraid it would detract from his appearance, as Zagreus initially thought, but because he thought Pat's was so pretty, he wanted to see his own better.

"I am going to have to be away from you two for a while," Achilles said. "For that, I am sorry."

"You have the worse part of it, I think," Patroclus said. "At least Zagreus and I will have each other. You'll have Thetis, true, but she's not nearly as fun."

Achilles gave a weak smile and a snorting, stifled laugh, still trying to keep himself quiet.

Achilles had been alright kissing them in front of his mother, but Zagreus doubted he'd feel the same way about Persephone. He kissed them tonight, though, each one in turn, slow and deep but not letting it turn into the kind of passion they'd experienced last night.

"If I pray to you while we are apart, will you hear me?" Achilles asked. "Will my voice reach you?"

"I hope so," Zagreus said.

"Then I will. Every day. Even if you do not hear me, know that your name will be on my lips. Yours too, Patroclus, although you have no way of hearing."

He saw a flash of Patroclus' grin in the dim light. "I can imagine for myself what you are saying to me."

"I love you both," Achilles said. "Tell me it won't be long."

"It won't," Patroclus said, in the sort of way of somebody who might be lying but wasn't sure of the truth of his words. "We'll see you soon. And when we meet again we will embrace you, and we won't ever let you go."

Zagreus rolls over Achilles so they can both embrace him now, giving up his spot in the middle so that they can put their arms around their soon-to-be absent lover. "I will listen for you," he said to Achilles. "I will hear you calling for me."

When Zagreus speaks again, it is with that same strange sureness with which he blessed them. He talks without planning what to say, and his words come free of him one by one, honest in a divine sort of way.

"Fate brought us together on this mountain, once and then once again. And whether on this mountain or no, fate will bring us together again."

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